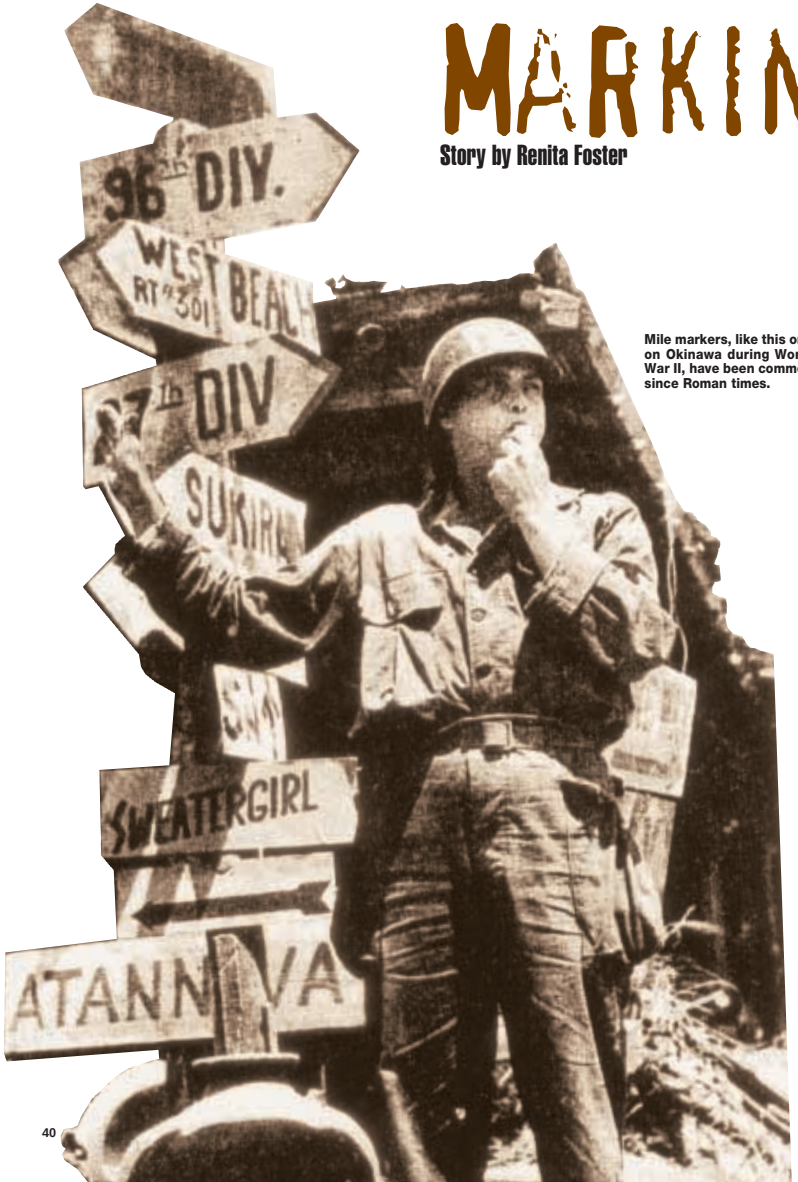
MARKING THE DISTANCE HOME

Story by Renita Foster



Mile markers, like this one on Okinawa during World War II, have been common since Roman times.

QUIZ any deployed soldier on what he or she might do to feel closer to home and many would likely say they'd erect a post with signs indicating the direction and distance to their most special place on earth — home.

Soldiers call the makeshift distance-direction indicators "mile markers," "road signs" or "signposts."

Vietnam veteran Herbert Brown, a civilian engineer in Indianapolis, Ind., said: "Signposts went up whenever we moved to new airfields, which was about six different times. We'd get to a new site and make the location signs with the slats from ammunition cases. I put up 'Indianapolis' for me."

Signposts began with the Romans and have existed since.

"I especially remember seeing the signs toward the end of World War II, especially in France," said O.B. Hill, a D-Day veteran from Cathedral City, Calif., who served with the 82nd Airborne Division. "I never heard the posts referred to by any official term. For me, they were simply reminders that the places that were so dear to our hearts still existed. New York City was almost always on a signpost somewhere because every one of us was either from there or would be going through there to get home."

Most soldiers don't know the origin of the military signpost, said Charleston, W. Va., military historian and Air Force veteran Dan Holmes. He believes it dates to the time of Roman armies, when their troops erected signs marking the route to Rome.

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"I especially remember seeing the signs toward the end of World War II, especially in France."

Retired BG John Kirk, a military researcher in Seattle, Wash., agreed with Holmes' idea that signposts began with the Romans and have existed since. "Legend has it that a stone column in what is now Normandy pointed Roman soldiers toward Rome," Kirk said.

Another theory is associated with Icelandic explorer Leif Eriksson, thought to be the first European to land on the North American continent. The theory is that Eriksson, upon seeing a graffiti-covered rock in northern Scotland, followed the scrawled direction to "turn left here" that brought him safely back to Norway.

While they're typically associated with war, the signposts crop up during noncombat deployments as well.

Al Blaney of Natick, Mass., a veteran of both World War II and the Korean War, remembered spending a few days building a signpost at Taegu Air Base, Korea, in 1950. His sign read: "Maine," the place he longed to return to because his wife was living there.

O.B. Hill, a WWII veteran of the 82nd Airborne Division, remembers mile markers being very common in Europe near the end of the war.

Ken Leeman, a Korean War veteran from Lakewood, N.J., said mile markers in Korea in 1950 were as common as the flight line, dispensary and barracks at Kimpo Air Base.

And during the Gulf War, erecting signposts was among the first chores soldiers performed, said Bruce Martin, then a transportation company commander who now works at Fort Monmouth, N.J., as a management analyst at the U.S. Army Communications and Electronics Command. The signs represented soldiers from every part of America.

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Bob Hopkins, a retired

An American soldier changes a street sign in Nürnberg, Germany, on April 20, 1945, signifying that the Yanks have arrived.

warrant officer, remembered contributing to the construction of mile markers while in Germany, during Return of Forces to Germany exercises in the 1970s. Soldiers in various units made a contest out of trying to create the most elaborate signpost around, he said.

"Before I knew it, we had a massive pole bearing the names of dozens of cities," Hopkins said. The signpost became a conversation piece that helped bridge gaps between soldiers, introducing those from the same towns or cities and allowing them to share stories about places and people they had in common.

Signpost construction began within hours of SSG George Cleaveland's arrival at Camp Stanley, Korea, in 1996, where he served with the 2nd Infantry Division near the demilitarized zone. Today he's an MP at Fort Monmouth.

"Basically, everything faced east, because we were so far west of the United States. And because we had soldiers from Arizona, Massachusetts, Arkansas, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Georgia, the names of various cities in each of those states had to be mounted on the signpost," Cleaveland said.

The exact mileage from the DMZ to each city was important, Cleaveland added. "I liked remembering the fact that Detroit was 22 hours away by air, because that number was much smaller than the actual mileage."

Besides bringing the names of hometowns to far off places, signposts can also indicate soldiers' attitudes about a location or assignment, Cleaveland said.

During the Korean War, members of a unit based at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, spelled their feelings out like this: "Group Headquarters, Too Damn Close" (to the action).

The signpost was reconstructed from a photograph for an exhibit at the U.S. Air Force Museum at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, during the armed forces' commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Korean War, said Jeff Duford, a historian at the museum.

He said one of the directional slats provided mileage to the nearest "watering hole," that is, place where a soldier could quench his thirst with a tall glass of Cuban rum or Kentucky bourbon.

Yet another signpost, this one in Bosnia-Herzegovina, indicated a less than desirable state of morale among soldiers from Great Britain, France and Germany; its "morale" directional arrow pointed straight down, said Dr. Jeffery Underwood, a U.S. Air Force Museum historian who photographed the post just outside Sarajevo.

Vietnam veteran Bob Maras of Lakehurst, N.J., said mile markers represent a vital link to home that a soldier can visualize. They're a reminder that he or she is only so many miles from home and will travel those miles again en route home.

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Signposts are also extensions of a soldier's imagination, passion and sense of humor, Duford said.

The mile marker Cleaveland associated with home while he was stationed near the Korean DMZ stood right outside his barracks door, so he passed it several times a day.

"I had two kids at the time, and I thought about them every time I passed the sign," Cleaveland said. "I even patted it every day for luck.

"Signposts always bring back the memories of home," he said. "That's a very positive thing. Because home is number one." □

SSG George Cleaveland remembers that the mileage signs on markers in Korea all pointed east, toward home.